

Supplementary
Submission No
96a

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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Powerhouse and Parramatta: Sustainability? Appropriate investment for sites and programs

Grace Cochrane AM, August 2016

Standing Committee 4: Museums and Galleries

Terms of reference:

- c) opportunities to revitalise the structure, reach, and impact of museums and galleries, and their research and collecting priorities
- d) access to the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, [...] and programs that promote physical and online access
- g) the impact of the efficiency dividend on the budgets of museums and galleries over the last 10 years, [...]
- e) The sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Parramatta; whether there are alternative strategies to support museum development

Point of view:

I am an independent curator, writer, consultant and educator in the field of decorative arts, crafts and design. I have worked in this field for over 40 years, nearly 20 of them from 1988-2005 at the Powerhouse Museum as a former senior curator (CV supplied separately). I maintain personal contact with over 1000 people in Australia and overseas who are relevant to this review, and am also part of a small professional group identified as the Powerhouse Museum Alliance. <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/> This group has been consulting widely with a range of state and national professional interest groups, including those in Parramatta. It has also been developing an archive of well-researched papers on the subject of the proposed relocation of the Museum to Western Sydney, in a broad context. These can be found on the website.

I am willing to take part in interviews related to Committee hearings.

My observations relate to sustainability: ensuring the provision of appropriate site investment and adequate continuing management funding for both the Powerhouse Museum and for a Parramatta cultural centre.

1. Background:

1.1 Leading the field: 1988 on...

- When the Powerhouse Museum opened in 1988 as the primary venue of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, following its already long history as a resource for education and information, it led the museum field in its presentation of exhibitions and strategies for interpretation of the collections. Associated with it was the Sydney Observatory and, for some years, the Mint Museum of Australian decorative arts, the Hyde Park Barracks Museum of NSW social history and a storage facility at Castle Hill, now the Castle Hill Discovery Centre. (Mint Museum and Hyde Park Barracks Museum transferred to Historic Houses Trust in 1990s.)
- It provided a unique combination of interactions between science and technology, decorative arts, crafts and design, and social history. This left the Art Gallery of NSW and the Australian Museum, also in the city centre, to focus on different collections. It remains the only museum of its kind in Australia.
- The Museum opened with about 25 exhibitions across, and integrating, its three broad areas of responsibility, in both permanent changing core exhibitions including iconic machines, and temporary exhibitions both internally curated and touring from elsewhere. Its professional staff of curators, registrars, conservators, education and public program officers, exhibition developers, publication and AV experts,

photographers and many others were acknowledged as leaders in their fields, and worked together to achieve the best results for audiences.

- It presented new ways of displaying objects and providing accessible and well-researched information about them, while ensuring that the audience experience was engaging, challenging, enjoyable and informative. Instead of simply providing 'display storage', it presented the collection in the context of stories of designing, making, using, owning and identifying them as important aspects of our heritage, with relevance in a contemporary context.
- Its leadership in this area was followed by others in Australia, and elsewhere.
- It maintained strong contact with regional museums, and cultural outreach was further enhanced by the transfer to the museum in 2003 of the Migration Heritage Centre, an effective on-line museum and archive.
- Over the next 15 years the Museum continued to develop imaginative and well-researched exhibitions, publications and public programs, and contribute to the museum field and a range of audiences across its many areas of expertise.

1.2 Cuts in Government funding: repercussions from mid-2000s

In the last 10 years, across the MAAS and other city museums, reductions in State Government funding for administration and running costs has declined substantially, with significant detrimental results.

- At the Powerhouse Museum staff numbers were almost halved through several rounds of redundancies, partly to enable programming because the program budgets had been consistently cut. This is an irrevocable loss of expertise and knowledge of both the historic collections and the contemporary museum field.
- Exhibition programs were changed radically to allow popular and entertaining exhibitions to displace the core collection displays and the temporary exhibitions contextualised by them, so that some extremely significant aspects of the collection have no continuing presence.
- About 30 Affiliated Societies representing many subject specialities, many of whom had previously met in the Museum and brought their support and influence to the Museum, eventually had to pay market rates to meet there, with the result that all have moved away to meet elsewhere.
- Collectors, benefactors and philanthropists who saw a place for their lifetime research and acquisitions started to look elsewhere for places to donate their collections and funds.
- The Museum has inadequate funds to maintain a consistent acquisition policy, and therefore a continuing record of significant items.
- The key losers in the changes regarding exhibition subject profiles were Decorative arts, crafts and design and Social History. Among the losses were:
 - the permanent changing exhibition of decorative arts & design, *Inspired! Design across time*, installed after an 8-year project in late 2005, came out in 2010 with no warning or permanent replacement;
 - the permanent changing Community Places exhibitions for NSW's multicultural social history disappeared;
 - the Indigenous and Asian Galleries of changing exhibitions were closed;
 - *Success and Innovation*, design for manufacture, closed in 2011
 - The Migration Heritage Centre was forced to close in 2013.
- While from time to time significant temporary exhibitions were held, based on the collection and supplemented by important loans, these could not be presented in the continuing context of a permanent changing exhibition in that area.
- The change in direction began to discourage existing audiences. The previously dedicated and recurring audiences from NSW, other Australian states and countries elsewhere, were less likely to be sustained beyond the experience of those specific subjects and for the few remaining permanent exhibitions.
- While exhibitions focussing on entertainment did bring in audiences (and entry fees) from those interested in one-off experiences, there was evidence of disenchantment from the key continuing constituencies that the museum has always represented.

1.3 The present time: what do audiences get?

In May 2014 the then Director, Rose Hiscock, and Chair of Trustees, John Shine, said in their MAAS 2020 Vision strategic plan:

'Our Museum requires a sustained and strategic approach to long-term investment. A renewal of permanent galleries and buildings, collections and exhibitions; and a focus on building audiences is required to regain the Museum's reputation and global standing.

Central to renewal is a commitment to ensure more of the Museum's vast collection is on display. This will enliven our spaces, stimulate curiosity, and increase access to our State's extraordinary collection.

As a primary focus of this Strategic Plan we will develop a significant Master Plan for all sites to include: A focus on Sydney Observatory to ensure it becomes a leading tourism attraction; The redevelopment and integration of the Powerhouse into Darling Harbour; Realising the potential of Powerhouse Discovery Centre in Sydney's West.

We live in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Looking forward to 2020, we see the hybrid disciplines of arts and science as increasingly relevant to our world.

The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences will capitalise on its unique collection, significant venues, and location in Australia's global city to position itself at the forefront of contemporary museums.' <http://www.thecultureconcept.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Museum-Applied-Arts-Sciences-2020-Vision.pdf>

- And then, with what proves to be no consultation at either end, the Government announced that the Museum was to be transplanted to Parramatta, ostensibly to provide cultural equity for the west, but in reality in order to sell the historic Ultimo site for development!
- In the meantime, while access had been inhibited with the demolition for development purposes, of the overhead walkway from the city, the recent opening of the Goods Line walkway, as well as a few 'free entry days' and recent 'free for children' arrangements, has resulted in significant increases in visitors. The Museum, along with the neighbouring Maritime Museum, also located in Darling Harbour, is clearly seen as an expected visitor destination in the city.
- The Powerhouse Museum has also continued to reinforce its long-standing connections with education institutions in Ultimo, and is an accessible central resource for students from more distant locations.

Scope:

However, the Powerhouse Museum's schedule continues to reflect the lack of continuing adequate funding for exhibitions and public programs.

- There has been no move to reinstate permanent changing collection exhibitions, previously abandoned so that the spaces could be used for short-term income-generating popular projects.
- Thus there is no broader social and cultural collection context in key fields for what may be presented in temporary exhibitions and public programs.
- On-line media documentation fills some of the gaps, but does not replace the experience of seeing real objects.
- There are inadequate funds to maintain acquisition of objects that represent significant contemporary innovations and developments.
- Unlike the Art Gallery of NSW, and much-compared (non-collection based) institutions such as Carriageworks, the Powerhouse Museum (and the Australian Museum) has always been required to charge entrance fees.

Presentation:

The Powerhouse Museum entered new territory in 1988 when it moved beyond

'display storage' and started to tell engaging and well-researched stories drawn from the collection.

- At present there is a tendency to present objects from the museum collection in displays of 'icons' or 'storage collections' with only basic identification, and if information is included, it is in indistinct text that is difficult to find or read (or is on a digital device, not always immediately adjacent). At times, objects have been exhibited as an artist's 'installation', similarly with little information, using the rationale that audiences 'experience' the display of the artist's selection, and make up their own minds about what it might mean.
- But this is a museum, not a contemporary art space. And while the opportunity for audience engagement presented in this way can be appealing, it has to be remembered that the objects are there because they are significant for their own reasons, and their stories can be equally engaging in their own right. It should also be noted that AGNSW and the Australian Museum successfully provide stories about the works themselves without inhibiting the experience.
- Have we wasted 30 years? It is suggested that these decisions are not only to do with current museum management ideologies, but moreover because there is insufficient funding to employ people or commit resources to carry out the job properly.

2.0 Issues:

2.1 Investment in current site:

It has been clear for some time that the Powerhouse Museum has required investment in considerable gallery expansion on, or adjacent to, its current Ultimo site, to provide wider access across all its main collection fields, through permanent, temporary and touring exhibitions, and meaningful public programs.

- Even the significant capital works carried out in recent years to develop temporary exhibition spaces has not resulted in any improvements to the provision of space for collection-based exhibitions, such as in decorative arts and design and NSW social history.
- Expanding on-site would cost much less than the projected costs (discussed in other submissions) of moving the entire museum to western Sydney, where it could only carry out its role in a shrunken, inadequate form, and without its key audiences.
- The money saved (and without selling the Powerhouse site) would allow a meaningful purpose-built or adapted facility in Parramatta, relevant to the expressed needs of Parramatta's constituents.
- Contributions from, or even branches of, the Powerhouse Museum would be possible in Western Sydney, to complement its own cultural and heritage centre, but only as (changing) and appropriately funded aspects of the central site in Ultimo, and potentially alongside similar contributions from other state institutions in the city.

2.2 Running costs:

- Quite apart from the vastly underestimated cost of moving the Powerhouse Museum to a new building in Parramatta, and the arguments for maintaining the museum in its current location for reasons of access, heritage significance and cultural history (covered in other submissions), is the serious question of ensuring adequate, on-going running costs.
- With reference to the Terms of Inquiry, it is evident that this museum, as well as others, has suffered from budget cuts to running costs, and that this situation can accumulate into long-term, irretrievable deficiencies in collection development, management and access, and the continuing loss of necessary expertise. The collections are owned by the people of NSW, who need to be confident that they are managed, developed and presented well.
- While entrance fees contribute to income, a state museum such as this should be freely accessible to its constituents and visitors, and the government needs to accept responsibility for adequate management costs. There are other income-generating strategies to consider.

- Some unasked and unanswered questions regarding the proposed move to Western Sydney still appear to be:
 - Does the state government have a commitment to adequate continuing funding for running costs for this museum (and others)?
 - Does the state government expect the Parramatta Council to contribute to capital development of a site for this state museum in Parramatta?
 - Does it expect the Parramatta Council to contribute to running costs of this state museum? (Does the Council know?)
 - Or does it expect this institution to become a regional cultural centre and therefore a regional responsibility?
 - What does this say for equity across other regional galleries and museums?
 - Moreover, is the clearly ill-informed state government abandoning its long-term responsibility for a significant state museum and its publicly-owned state collection?

3.0 Recommendations:

The NSW Government must:

- Recognise that the Powerhouse Museum must remain in Ultimo.
- Recognise that the Museum requires investment in gallery expansion on, or adjacent to, its current site, to provide wider access to and engagement with the collection and related programs across all its main collection fields.
- Reconsider its efficiency dividend legislation, to stop the progressive decline through under-funding of management costs, of the ability of museums such as the Powerhouse Museum to responsibly carry out their programs and enhance their role as custodians of NSW cultural heritage.
- Consider equity with eg. the Art Gallery of NSW, and cancel the requirement to charge entry fees, thus increasing audiences to the publicly-owned collection.
- Recognise that it will be far more cost-effective, by millions of dollars, to develop the Powerhouse Museum on site, in this way, than completely transplant it elsewhere, out of its acknowledged context.
- Recognise that, at the same time, the savings made will allow the Government and City of Parramatta Council to develop a cultural facility in Parramatta that specifically meets the expressed needs of the audiences there.